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An Interview with Nínive Calegari, Founder of The Teacher Salary Project
Conducted By Jane Henzerling, Fellow

The Teacher Salary Project is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to raising awareness about the impact of underpaying and under-valuing educators. The organization works to ensure that teaching becomes the prestigious, desirable, financially viable, and professionally exciting job it needs to be.

JH: What was the inspiration for The Teacher Salary Project?

NC: The inspiration for my work with teacher salary issues comes from my personal experience as a classroom teacher. I felt I had the best job in the world and was really inspired by my colleagues. In the three different settings where I taught, I was incredibly lucky and had three wonderful principals. I felt that becoming a teacher was a political act, I felt earnest and patriotic, and I thought the work was noble. In my twenties, I realized that the core problem with my profession was that not everyone wanted my job.

I understood that people didn't feel my work was sophisticated. People often gave a condescending response of "Good for you!" when I said I was a classroom teacher. That seemed precisely the wrong response. I wanted people to value the profession. It's not a silver bullet, but salaries are a tipping point to making the work more appreciated and deeply valued. We do, in this society, value money: we pay people well when we believe they deserve it. We have allowed teachers' salaries to stagnate for 40 years, so we've changed the professional status opportunity of this job. At the same time, women have had an explosion of new opportunities, so there existed this extraordinary talent pool that we can no longer take advantage of.

The work began with a conversation in 2003 with my friend, Dave Eggers. We started talking about gathering oral histories of teachers -- their challenges, their successes, their extraordinary impact in the community, their importance -- and we also wanted to gather stories about the absurdity of teachers' working second jobs. We started finding great teachers and documenting the sacrifices they made to stay in the profession. We talked to teachers who were housekeepers, lawnmowers, construction workers. Obviously, we spoke to teachers who tutored and monitored SATs and all the regular things people expect teachers to do to earn a secondary income, because they can't make ends meet.

Teaching is the most important job in the country -- our peace and prosperity depend on the quality of our teachers -- and that how we treat our teachers reflects the values of our society. Given that importance, it's absurd that teachers are not paid professionally.

JH: In addition to this value sensibility about the teaching profession, what do you think are some of the structural, political, and policy barriers to -- or excuses for -- the stagnation of teacher salaries over the last 40 years?

NC: There is a gender component to this dynamic. We don't value women in the same way that we value men. It's well-documented that we have income gaps along gender lines. That is systemically true, and it's painful. In addition, teachers ourselves believe somehow that the work is nobler because of the low pay. There's a psychology there that is important to diagnose. I have had teachers themselves criticize The Teacher Salary Project's work. They say things to me like, "I don't work for the money; I work for the kids." That misses the point. I understand that teachers are motivated because of the students, the challenges, and their own integrity. What I'm offended by is that we allow these good people to have financial stress. Everyone can think of a teacher he admires and respects, but I do believe that America has an ambivalent feeling toward teachers, and that there are some elements in our culture who think the job is easy. When I say that I want to double teachers' salaries, there is always a knee-jerk reaction about summers off and the 3pm dismissal. No good teachers clock in at 8:00 and leave at 3:00.

It's going to take an incredible movement to shift this in our country. Legislators need to fear they won't be re-elected if they don't take on this issue. In order to get there, there's a lot of work to do.

JH: What are some of the specific initiatives and approaches that The Teacher Salary Project is undertaking to create that shift?

NC: We started by documenting stories, hundreds of stories from around the country, as well as interviews with researchers. That became the book *Teachers Have it Easy: The Big Sacrifices and Small Salaries of America's Teachers.* We pushed to get these compelling stories out there, because we thought if people knew these stories, we'd behave better as a culture. The book had some success – it was a *New York Times* bestseller. But people would say, "I bought the book for my cousin, who is a teacher." It was getting to the wrong audience.

When I saw *An Inconvenient Truth*, I thought, that made us better informed and helped create a movement. Since I wasn't getting to the right audience with the book, I'd make a film. We followed four teachers in different circumstances between 2007 and 2011 and got shorter footage from other teachers, experts, and legislators. What we were trying to do was twofold: to make sure that people in the outside world knew that teaching is sophisticated work that merits respect, and to show the absurdity of these good people leaving the profession because they can't subsist or raise a family on a teacher's salary. One of the teachers featured in the film ended up getting divorced because of the financial strain and the need to work additional jobs on the weekends. The ultimate goal of the movie was to create a political climate in which people's minds and hearts would become open to the idea of higher salaries.

Subsequent to the book and the movie, we did something called the Governors' Challenge, in which we approached every governor, 43 spouses, and every state superintendent with research, a booklet, and a love note. We are non-partisan. We work with anyone who wants to raise salaries. We asked them to consider the wellbeing of their kids vis-à-vis how well they were supporting their teachers. At that point, in 2011, 1.8 million of our 3.2 million teachers were about to retire at the end of long careers, and states and districts needed to find a new talent pool. Today, in addition to the retirements, the regular pathways we used to rely on are drying up.

Because of the critical teacher shortages and empty classrooms, The Teacher Salary Project is being approached by groups at all different levels. Legislators like Rebecca Millet of Maine, who is trying to pass legislation to change the base salary from $30,000 to $40,000 a year, asked us to support her and create buzz around her legislation. We also are trying to drill down in San Francisco. It's an imperfect case study, but significant, because San Francisco is experiencing a Gold Rush right now, and teachers are particularly left behind. It's an extreme example of how we devalue the profession: San Francisco teachers live in remodeled studios above garages, live with roommates, and don't even live in town – they live in Oakland. There isn't one

house that a teacher can afford in San Francisco, and in fact, they're priced out of homes in 32 metropolitan areas. It's not just a San Francisco story.

JH: The teacher stories presented in the book and in the film that tug at the heartstrings can be powerful and resonant on a personal level. From a policymaking perspective, what do you think are some of the most salient and compelling points that were put forth by the researchers to back up the importance of this initiative?

NC: What I find compelling from a legislative perspective is that teachers – even if they say they're not motivated by money – still make financially-based decisions. In West Virginia, we took research to the governor's education team that showed that the state was training teachers, but that they were leaving for jobs in neighboring states where the salary was several thousand dollars higher. That governor raised all teacher salaries by 2 percent. You don't want to lose your talent – you certainly don't want to train and then lose your talent. We're in a competitive landscape. You want to make sure you're offering a professional scenario. Another fact: turnover is incredibly expensive. It numbers in the billions of dollars. If I were a legislator, I'd want to figure out how to stop that bleeding. Legislators use more short-term thinking, because they're trying to get to the next election. The Teacher Salary Project is trying to address a long-range, worsening problem that involves societal misunderstanding about the importance of teachers. What we're trying to solve will take patience and a long-range view of the profession. We need to get to the place where every parent in the country is asking for this. Until we have that kind of seismic shift, we probably won't be able to convince legislators to do what they should.

JH: Can you talk about the effort to create clear strategic paths – the policy routes, fiscal considerations, budget allocations -- that show state leaders how to go about raising teacher salaries across the board?

NC: Yes, we want to show state leaders that it's possible to raise teacher salaries to $120,000 a year. It's challenging, because we have 14,000 districts in 50 different states. One of the big transformations that Amanda Ripley documents in her book *The Smartest Kids in the World and How they Got There,* is in Poland, which has a more centralized dynamic. Our challenge is that we like local control. It's difficult for The Teacher Salary Project to make a big difference immediately, because there are so many different players and layers. Because of that, we are documenting different ways that states, districts, and schools are raising salaries.

For example, Helena, Montana, designed early retirement packages. They had no one applying [to teach] – they trained teachers, but the teachers were fleeing to neighboring states with a $3,000 higher base pay. With the early retirement package, the district was able to raise salaries, and all of a sudden, they didn't have enough file rooms for all the applications for teaching positions. Denver passed a $25 million bond to raise teacher salaries that were tied to evaluations. South Dakota just passed a half-cent sales tax to raise teacher salaries. In DC, Michelle Rhee raised the highest salary from $87,000 to $131,000. Now, scores of teachers in DC earn 6-figure salaries. Rhee raised private money and let go of administrators when she didn't see the impact of their work. Compare that to Los Angeles Unified, in which only 40% of the thousands of employees are classroom teachers. Who are all those people and what are they doing? Communities are going to need to find their own ways based on their context and what they can pull off.

A lot of waste can be identified - from textbooks to ineffective professional development. Every community will need to go through a process, first to decide to prioritize their teachers and then to determine what resources they have and what approaches they can employ. I'm interested in the range of strategies; I'm excited to see how different communities tackle this.

JH: What's your current thinking about how you'll take these sample practices and put them in front of decision-makers at district and state levels?

NC: We would like to create a toolkit: a straightforward resource that provides a range of examples. Leaders can look at how other places did it and then either figure out which strategies they can copy, or come up with their own.

Another approach responds to every single state's having had to explain to the federal Department of Education why kids from more humble backgrounds get stuck with teachers who aren't qualified and in schools that suffer from higher teacher turnover. The pain around teacher shortages is felt most harshly by kids with fewer financial resources and less stability; it's adding insult to injury. It was exciting to have the Department of Ed require each state to articulate the root causes of why. More than 30 states identified pay as one of the root causes, but when they listed strategies to solve the issue, few mentioned pay. We're trying to tackle something states like to ignore. We diagnosed all of those reports, and we're going back to those states to bring attention to what they said about pay, and see if that can become motivational.

The other strategy we've been thinking about is how to use humor. We have pictures of public officials walking dogs and driving Lyft, some of the second jobs many teachers have to do. Perhaps by poking a little fun, we can help them understand the absurdity. They are public workers. So are teachers. You could argue that the teacher is more important.

JH: Have you found that there is a tipping point, a per-pupil funding level necessary to raise teacher salaries to $120,000 a year? It's a lot easier in a place like DC than in a place like California.

NC: I don't have a specific number, but we've documented every state's per-pupil funding and cross-referenced it with per-prisoner funding. Where per-pupil funding is lower, per-prisoner funding tends to be higher. It's easier to address salaries where per-pupil funding is higher. Montana decided to prioritize teacher pay because of shortages, and has raised teacher salaries by 18% in the past ten years. When a state decides to prioritize this, it is absolutely possible.

Another dynamic we've documented is the percentage that teacher salaries have changed over the past ten years. In 30 states, they haven't only stagnated; they've gone down. Literally, less money. We would benefit from healthy competition. I want teachers coming out of teacher training programs and applying only where the pay is good. This would force other districts to follow suit.

The work is valuable everywhere, but I believe in the Daniel Pink assertion that you have to earn a certain amount of money to do your profession fearlessly. I want teachers to be able to focus on their jobs. It's a huge job. It's multi-dimensional and fulfilling, and it's exhausting and demanding. It's also crucial to our democracy and our society, yet we put teachers in a tough situation. The job will never be easy, but teachers should be free from financial stress.

JH: Final thoughts?

NC: I want The Teacher Salary Project to become obsolete. College kids tell us they *want* meaningful work, but they're also not driven to go into teaching. That lack of interest has a lot to do with asking teachers to be poor. We want college kids to worry about being able to become a teacher, in the same way they worry about getting into medical school. It needs to be that kind of honor and that kind of opportunity, and we're obviously not there.

References and further reading:

http://www.theteachersalaryproject.org/facts-about-teachers-2/